

Environmentally active citizens

Conservation
Volunteers
Northern Ireland



POSITION PAPER



A better environment is at the core of everything Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland (CVNI) does. Our challenge is to encourage the whole of society to think and behave differently, to create supported opportunities giving everyone access to a better environment where biodiversity is enhanced, and environmental inequalities, social and economic consequences are minimised.

We believe that the environment belongs to everyone, and that everyone has the ability to get actively involved in looking after local green spaces. We recognise that disadvantaged communities experience the poorest quality environments.¹ We aim to work with all sections of society to conserve nature, develop good quality natural surroundings and reconnect people with the natural environment.

Our goal is to work from a sustainable development perspective, using community-based projects to achieve environmental enhancement and improvement, and to deliver wider social and economic goals. The outcome is “micro-regeneration” – community led activities using environmental improvement as a driver for all-round improvements to quality of life.

Key points

- There is a need to increase public awareness on issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss, and to translate knowledge into action.²
- CVNI brings people together to “act locally” – improving the places where they live, encouraging positive environmental actions.
- CVNI involves people from a diverse range of communities. We broaden the appeal for conservation volunteering by making it relevant to people’s daily lives and flexible enough to fit in.

Carbon Army

CVNI’s Carbon Army launched in November 2009 as our practical response to the challenges of climate change.

In May 2010 we launched our Grow Your Own Food campaign, to support and encourage people to take an active interest in growing their own fruit and vegetables contributing to a better environment. We support successful allotment projects across Northern Ireland, e.g. Devonish, Eden and Ballysillan. These sites are used to demonstrate models of best practice to engage and motivate individuals, families and communities to become involved in food growing.



Public engagement challenges and evidence

INCREASE OPPORTUNITY FOR SUPPORTED ACTION	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>Research shows since 2001 the number of people formally volunteering (within an organisation) is at best static, whilst the number of people volunteering informally (as an individual within their neighbourhood) has fallen. ³</p> <p>There is a need for flexible, interesting opportunities to fit with available leisure time of individuals and families. Those who do volunteer are being more selective in terms of how they volunteer and are giving less time on average to volunteering.³</p>	<p>The value of time contributed by CVNI's 800 regular and 29,000 occasional volunteers per year is estimated at £2.4 million, equivalent to 162 full time jobs.</p> <p>CVNI Adapt project delivery offering locally based, flexible volunteering opportunities, e.g. weekday teams, Saturday projects and family events, to better suit people's availability. Over the past six months CVNI have engaged 603 families, 1,321 family volunteers in a range of local environmental projects.</p>
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>If everyone in the world lived as we do in Northern Ireland , we would need three planets to support us.</p> <p>Socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations.</p>	<p>Discuss global issues and devise local solutions by engaging and involving local people, increasing skills and understanding of positive individual and collective actions.</p> <p>Work in partnership with land owners and across sectors to promote environmentally friendly land management, community inclusion and sustainable actions.</p>
INCLUSIVENESS	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>20% of the lowest income group live in poor quality environments compared to 11% of those in the highest.⁴ Policy makers fail to see such environmental inequalities as a priority "resulting in a lack of measures to address them and reduced spending in deprived neighbourhoods, compared to more affluent areas."⁵</p>	<p>CVNI has a strong track record in inclusion: 13% of our volunteers are from minority backgrounds (national demographic 8% NI census). And 24% of CVNI volunteers are from the 15% most deprived areas as defined by the Index of Multiple Deprivation.</p>
YOUNG PEOPLE	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>Research has shown that people who have a positive experience of volunteering as a young person are more likely to stay connected to volunteering throughout their life.⁶</p>	<p>Over a quarter of CVNI volunteers are under 25. We work with schools, colleges, youth services, probation services and others, offering young people from all sections of society the chance to act on their interests and concerns. CVNI actively engage over 6700 school children per year.</p>
COLLECTIVE ACTION	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>Many people show concern about the ineffectiveness of adopting small lower-carbon behaviours when others are still emitting elsewhere.⁷</p> <p>Initiatives to promote behaviour change are often most effective when they are carried out at the community level and involve direct contact with people.⁸</p>	<p>Large scale, local events through campaigns like CVNI's Carbon Army. Online tracking and mapping of projects enables volunteers to see the scale of their collective impact.</p> <p>CVNI's Community Network supports independent community groups and individuals to work together to achieve a vision of a better environment for people and wildlife.</p>
PEOPLE AGED 50+	CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTION
<p>Like other countries in the developed world Northern Ireland population is aging, Population projections for Northern Ireland forecast a 70% increase in people aged 50+ years between 2007 and 2030.⁹</p>	<p>CVNI is committed to offering a range of opportunities to bring skills and qualities of people aged 50+ have gained through their life, to assist in the promotion, governance and management of our organisation.</p>



Our Belfast Food Growing Projects have expanded to supporting over 40 allotments in the past 12 months. Melanie, her husband and two sons have enjoyed the challenge and reaped the rewards of the first full growing season on their plot.

“We have all enjoyed spending valuable time together as a family, especially as we have no green outdoor space at our house. This is a brilliant way to learn new skill, make friends and I’ve even lost a stone!”



Stephen started volunteering with CVNI in 2006. Incorporating his engineering background he has undertaken the sustainable development role of Regional Environmental Champion.

“Through volunteering with CVNI I have been able to use my enthusiasm for a better environment to help others to live environmentally friendly. I enjoy devising suitable systems to reduce energy consumption and increase re-use and recycling especially when it saves money at the same time.”

CVNI’s beliefs and values

Based on our experience of working with people in the natural environment over the past 28 years and the evidence outlined above, we believe that:

- Conserving and improving local environments is relevant to everyone. People are drawn to environmental volunteering through the love of nature. Once involved, with the correct support this practical action is often the foundation for people’s sustained action within their local community.
- Volunteering with CVNI enables people to make the connection between their local environment and global concerns such as climate change and biodiversity loss.
- In disadvantaged areas community environmental projects can act as a powerful tool for regeneration and social inclusion. Poor quality green spaces discourage local use and encourage negative activities such as vandalism. Involving local communities in maintaining high quality spaces can help to control crime and anti-social behaviour.¹⁰
- Involving young people in a variety of volunteering experiences induces positive social behaviour with community and environmental benefits. Sharing experiences across class and cultural boundaries can also contribute to personal development, improved community relations and global understanding.
- People are ready and willing to come together and take action locally.¹¹ The natural environment is a concern for many people, CVNI delivers tailored support to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to sustain positive actions.

Conservation Volunteer’s commitments

Over the next four years CVNI will actively support 134,000 people in environmental action, significant input to a UK wide target of 1.5 million.

PRACTICAL ACTION We commit to supporting large scale but locally focused action. We will continue to give people the skills and confidence to connect with their local environment and make tangible improvements to the green spaces where they live.

SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY We will work across all sectors to further develop effective ways in which environmental volunteering can engage people who may not ordinarily be environmentally inclined. And we will work to better understand how environmental volunteering functions as a catalyst for other forms of positive environmental action in homes, schools and workplaces.

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Conservation Volunteers ask for...

Community environmental projects to overcome persistent short-term funding arrangements. Stop-start project delivery fractures relationships with communities and undermines confidence and capacity. CVNI's scale, expertise and durability present a valuable strategic opportunity for building pro-environmental behaviour across Northern Ireland society. We ask funders to consider more strategic partnerships based on more ambitious long term goals.

Strong and enduring partnerships. We promote sustained support and co-operation of landowners, third sector partners, funders and government departments and agencies.

Increased support for researchers to compare the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns versus interventions that take people straight to the action. We ask researchers and policy makers to work with us to make best use of CVNI's ability to stimulate social and environmental responsibility.

Support in realising the potential of the online Management Information System for analysing the scale, nature and value of environmental volunteering. CVNI holds a system that enables the mass tracking and analysis of pro-environmental behaviour, UK wide. We are seeking partners and supporters to help develop its potential.

Funders to re-assess the in-kind value of an environmental volunteering workday. This is commonly rated at £50, but this figure has been in use for at least 15 years (i.e. its value has decreased in real terms every year for a decade and a half). It is incongruous for government to emphasise the importance of community involvement whilst allowing funding mechanisms to persistently devalue it. We ask government to end the confusion.

INCLUSIVENESS We welcome everyone to our projects and reach out to disadvantaged communities. CVNI aims to work supportively and inclusively with community groups, putting our expertise alongside their local knowledge. The process will include nurturing leadership skills within the community for its long term benefit and sustainability. We will continue to tackle stigma and social unease by providing a safe space for people from different backgrounds to meet, mix and find out about one another.

YOUNG PEOPLE By widening participation and removing the barriers to volunteering and community service, we secure the active involvement of young citizens. We seek positive outcomes including environmental and community benefit, personal development, education and training, entry to employment and health benefits.

PEOPLE AGED 50+ We will continue to develop opportunities across our organisation to utilise skills and experiences people have gained throughout their lives in many different settings. To attract a more diverse range of people we offer a range of roles with various levels of commitment, regular to occasional volunteering opportunities.

For more information about CVNI's work, please contact us:

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The European Year of Volunteering 2011



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